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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 1852
INFO RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING PRIORITY 4809
RUEHMO/AMEMBASSY MOSCOW PRIORITY 9002
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SIPDIS

C O R R E C T E D C O P Y (CHANGED CABLE CLASSIFICATION)

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TAGS: MARR PGOV PREL KS KN

SUBJECT: OCT 2 INTER-KOREAN MILITARY WORKING LEVEL TALKS

Classified By: POLMC JOE YUN, REASONS 1.4(B), (D)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY The 37th inter-Korean military working level, Colonel-level talks were held at Panmunjom on Thursday, 2 Oct. This was the first North/South official meeting since Lee Myung-bak took office. The last military meeting was held on January 25, 2008. Colonel Lee Sang Chul of the ROK Ministry of National Defense delivered a message that centered on objections to the slandering of ROK President Lee, Myung-bak, improving Transportation Corridor transits and inter-Korean cooperation ventures as had been agreed to in the fall of 2007, and a request to resolve the shooting death of a ROK tourist at Mount Kumgang. The KPA delegation headed by Senior Colonel(SrCOL) Pak, Rim-su was uninterested in addressing the ROK concerns and solely stressed their discontent with the continued scattering of propaganda leaflets in the North launched by ROK NGOs. The DPRK side alluded that tours to both Mount Kumgang and Kaesong City may be terminated and the Kaesong Industrial Complex closed if the leaflet distribution continued unchecked by ROK authorities. MND Officers stressed the need to continue mil-to-mil talks but their Northern counterparts did not reciprocate this view. END SUMMARY

¶2. (C) MND officers at the meeting noted that from the moment the Korean Peoples Army(KPA) delegation members crossed the MDL they wore scowls on their faces. The meeting's negative tone was further exacerbated when MND's COL Lee offer to shake hands was rejected by his North Korean counterpart. The difficulties were compounded by the KPA delegation's insistence that the meeting be open to the media. The KPA delegation included six "reporters". The desire for media presence ran counter to the standard operating procedures followed by both sides in the past and the MND delegation insisted that no press would have access to the meeting. The back and forth caused by this disagreement considerably delayed the meeting's start time. Eventually the reporters were excluded and returned north.

¶3. (C) MND's opening comments focused on the need to stop slandering Lee Myung-bak as it raised tensions, resumption of mil-to-mil talks on improving Transportation Corridor transits and inter-Korean cooperation ventures, and resolution of the Mount Kumgang shooting incident. MND also notified the KPA that equipment and materials needed to solve communications problems in the Transportation Corridors were now available. The KPA response to the MND delegations points of concern was that of disinterest. Despite the lack of progress MND stressed the need for continued talks to their KPA counterparts. The KPA delegation was not receptive to this idea. In regards to the materials needed to solve the communication issues, the KPA delegation simply stated that once the materials were delivered there would be no

problems.

¶4. (C) The KPA delegation's opening comments dealt with only one issue, the distribution of leaflets originating in the ROK. The leaflets condemning Kim Jong Il and his communist regime are distributed in the DPRK via balloons. ROKG has confirmed that NGOs led by North Korean defectors and Christian groups are responsible for distributing the leaflets. The KPA brought six A4 letter sized boxes containing leaflets collected in the DPRK. SrCOL Park read an exhaustive litany of dates, times and places where the leaflets were collected. SrCOL Park also indicated that if the distribution of leaflets did not cease, there would be "grave consequences." He then proceeded to detail these consequences:

- 1.) Termination of tours to both Mount Kumgang and Kaesong City and closure of the Kaesong Industrial Complex.
- 2.) Increased inconvenience and possible cessation of movement through the Transportation Corridors.
- 3.) Revocation of permission for ROK personnel to stay in Kaesong city and the Mount Kumgang resort area.

¶5. (C) The MND delegation responded that the ROKG is abiding by the 2004 agreement to cease propaganda efforts by both sides along the DMZ. They also stated the mil-to-mil talks were not an appropriate forum for addressing the leaflet distribution issue, and that in any case, the ROK military had no control over ROK civilian actions. When speaking with Poloff, COL Park asserted that while the KPA officials understand the ROKG's inability to control the civilian populace's activities, they were using the issue as a means to exert pressure on the South. He also noted that the threats were real, not to be taken lightly. The KPA delegation continued to voice their concerns in regards to the leaflets, however when the ROK response remained unchanged they repeatedly called for an end to the meeting. The meeting ended at about 1215; just over 90 minutes in length, much shorter than anticipated.

¶6. (C) MND's COL Lee stated that the DPRK was "very sensitive to the issue and sees it a great threat to their regime." He followed this comment by remarking that the more specific nature of the retaliation lent them greater credence in the eyes of the ROKG. He opined that while he did not expect any immediate action on the part of the DPRK, a steady ratcheting up of pressure was possible.

¶7. (C) After the meeting when SrCOL Pak was asked by the South Korean media whether he thought there would be additional North-South mil-to-mil talks. He indicated he did not think they would occur this year. However, moments before he made that statement, he had shaken COL Lee's hand and had a "private" conversation with him, encouraging ROKG to proceed with delivering the promised communication equipment and materials. MND sources indicated the ROKG will develop a policy to deal with the leaflet issue that would be led by the Ministry of Unification, which could exercise a stricter interpretation of the existing laws. However, the ROKG will be quite limited in what it can do because the LMB administration is somewhat sympathetic to the case of the conservative and religious NGOs.

STEPHENNS